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Senate

FOSTER CARE INDEPENDENCE ACT

• Ms. SNOWE. Mr. President, I rise today to support the Foster Care Independence Act. I am a cosponsor of the foster care bill that was originally introduced in the Senate by our colleague, the late Senator John Chafee. Mr. President, this bill is an enormously important piece of legislation. It provides the means for States to support some of our most vulnerable children—teens who are facing the tenuous position of being dropped from foster care support for the simple reason that they are turning 18.

For many young people, the transition to adulthood is an exciting time of newfound independence. These young people navigate this challenging time with the help and support of their parents and family, secure in the knowledge that a “safety net” awaits them at home.

This momentous transition can be much more daunting, however, for the 20,000 foster children who make the difficult shift from foster care to independence and adulthood. Research has shown that these children—who average four homes in the final 7 years of their foster care—face many challenges when their benefits end and they are left on their own at the age of 18.

Today, there are more than 500,000 children in foster care throughout the United States—young people wrenched from the security of their homes by death, abuse, or other tragedy. For these children, foster parents offer the only support they know, and the abrupt end of care can make transition to adulthood all the more important. We are asking these teens to move out of their foster care and immediately become productive members of society—yet we forget that older foster kids face the same growing pains faced by teens in more stable homes. They are struggling with growing up, struggling with establishing their independence, and struggling to mature and develop their personal identity. But this struggle

is made exponentially more difficult when the teens must also face the struggle of housing, poverty, and unemployment.

In 1986, Congress created the Independent Living Program to address the transitional needs of foster children as they reach the age when they are asked to live independently. Studies of teens who are forced to abruptly leave foster care have found that they have a significantly higher-than-normal rate of school dropouts, out-of-wedlock births, homelessness, health and mental health problems, poverty, and unemployment. One 1998 study of former foster care youth by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that more than 40 percent of interviewed youth had been homeless, incarcerated, or had received public assistance since leaving State care. This same study found that during the 12- to 18-month period after leaving care, 44 percent of former care youths had difficulty obtaining medical care due to a lack of medical insurance and the high cost of care.

These foster children deserve a safe, stable, and nurturing environment in order for them to become productive, self-sufficient members of society. The Foster Care Independence Act will expand Independent Living Program services to provide this support for foster children who are 18 to 21 years old and are still learning valuable life skills. This bill will enable teens between the ages of 18 and 21 to successfully shift from foster families into independent adulthood. This bill will help teens during this important transition by doubling Independent Living Program funding and expanding access to Medicaid health care and mental health services through their 21st birthday.

Foster children frequently lack a sense of permanency and the skills that are essential to becoming self-reliant and productive adults. Through State-administered Independent Living Programs, foster children will be able

to obtain mentoring and personal support. The expanded program will assist older foster care adolescents in obtaining a high school diploma and/or secondary education; career exploration; and preventative health services. They may also use this program to develop vital daily living skills such as budgeting, locating and maintaining housing, and financial planning.

We expect much of our youth because they are the future of our Nation. In turn, we must be willing to give them the support they need to learn, grow, and transition to productive and stable adult lives. The Foster Care Independence Act provides these crucial services for America's older foster children. As Congress works to conclude the first session of the 106th Congress, it is essential that the Senate echo the broad, bipartisan support given to this bill by the U.S. House of Representatives—which recently passed a companion bill by a large majority—and give these older foster children the stability they deserve.

Mr. President, we have all heard the old adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound a cure.” Surely this rings true for helping our older foster children in their transition to adulthood. I can think of no better tribute to Senator Chafee, in tribute to his memory and to his life's work as an advocate of America's children, to name this bill in honor of him. And for this reason I rise today in support of the bill and I ask my colleagues to vote for this tremendously important piece of legislation.●

CONTINUED REPORTING OF INTERCEPTED WIRE, ORAL, AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS ACT

• Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I am pleased that the Senate is today considering H.R. 3111 to exempt from automatic elimination and sunset certain reports submitted to Congress that are useful and helpful in informing the

● This “bullet” symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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